

The Art of Intrigue: The Hierakonpolis Painted Tomb

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Whether it represents episodes in an epic cycle, highlights of a funerary ritual, an early royal festival or simply isolated vignettes, the Painted Tomb (Tomb 100) remains as fascinating today as it was when discovered over a century ago (on February 5, 1899). Few finds from Hierakonpolis have generated so much discussion, and rightly so. The surviving grave goods date it to Naqada IIC/D, making this tomb the earliest in Egypt to have painted walls, and it is still the only Predynastic example known. Yet what do we really know about it? It seems the answer is both a lot... and very little.

Striking is its size. The main panel is nearly 5 meters long, allowing for greater detail and complexity than is usual in Predynastic art. In addition, it provides us with a very rare glimpse of a world in colour: a desert yellow hue for the background; figures in white, red, and black; and boat hulls filled with green. While it is the spectacular boats that attract the eye, and the human figures in their various poses that have prompted much discussion, here we concentrate on the plethora of animals spread throughout the decorated space. Species include ibex, gazelle, oryx, hartebeest, aurochs, donkey, lion, dog, and a variety of birds.

Full comprehension of the tableau and the animals within it is hampered to some extent by the state of preservation: the right side of the painting was heavily damaged, giving the perhaps erroneous impression that the figures are more numerous on the left, the direction in which the boats are heading. In actuality, the composition may have been more balanced than it now appears. Nevertheless, the first and most obvious observation is that we are not viewing a naturalistic landscape. While the boats suggest a riverine

milieu, Nilotic fauna, such as hippopotami and crocodiles, so prevalent in the mobile art of the earlier Predynastic, have given way to desert dwellers. The river clearly remains central, but it is no longer symbolized by the dangerous and powerful creatures lurking in its waters. Instead, the Nile is now tamed and ordered, an avenue for movement and transport marked by the large and elaborate boats, which wend their way through the wilderness represented by the fauna of the deserts. The same dichotomy can be seen in the scenes applied to the numerous so called 'boat-pots' of Decorated ware, which are contemporary with the tomb painting, and with which it is often compared. However, crucial differences exist between them with regard to the species portrayed and the way they are used. While desert animals are shown being hunted, captured, and sacrificed in the tomb painting, this is hardly ever the case on pottery.

Filling at least one-third of the wall on the upper right are dynamic scenes of hunting. Just preserved on the top edge is a male figure lassoing a long-horned aurochs (?), while nearby a large black canid (?) pursues several oryx, perhaps causing the wild donkeys below to scatter. Further to the right, in a composition reminiscent of earlier art, two dogs (one with collar) attack two ibexes while a human hunter cheers them on. There can be little doubt that these scenes were designed to show the traditional theme of chaos being brought under control, and this same concern is developed in other parts of the wall in some new and different ways.

In the lower centre of the tableau, a series of vignettes, possibly meant to be considered as a group, show the control of both animals and humans through sacrifice and combat



Left side of the Painted Tomb main tableau. Compiled by Joel Paulson from the facsimile of F.W. Green.

apparently in a ritual setting. Perhaps framing this ensemble are gazelle, identified by their forward pointing horns, which are presented in some rather uncomfortable positions. On one side, two are bound together head to foot; on the other, four gazelles and a hornless kid (?) are confined in a circular trap. Notable are the colours applied to them. While the outlines are relatively naturalistic, the colours filling them are not, and have been applied mainly for decorative effect. Near the bottom of the scene is a hartebeest with characteristic lyre-shaped horns that looks backwards, as if startled by the lasso that ensnares it, while above is a trussed cattle effectively portrayed in the process of being sacrificed. Notably, all of these species have counterparts in the faunal remains at HK29A.

More ambiguous are the various antelopes and birds shown meandering above this grouping. One is clearly an oryx, rendered in a very realistic form and colour, suggesting actual familiarity with this species, which is known for living preferably in the remotest desert. The birds, large and black (guinea fowl?) and small and white, are interesting additions, heralding the increased importance and diversity of avian fauna (along with oryx and lions) that will become a feature of later art, as seen most clearly in the ivories of the Main Deposit (see next article). None of these creatures show any indication of being hunted or disturbed and their meaning and associations are unclear. The same is true for the four recumbent ibexes resting on a ground line positioned above the large boat at the top edge of the wall. They appear quite disconnected from the dynamic activities taking place below and may represent the animals the way they were observed in their natural setting, resting on a steep hill or atop a cliff.

While all of the motifs in the painting are of interest, the most intriguing are certainly those on the far left side.

The most eye-catching is the so called ‘master of animals’, a male figure, with black featureless face—possibly masked—standing between and holding up two rearing lions. The core motif is of Mesopotamian origin and redolent of triumph on its own, but here it would seem the story is expanded and enhanced. In the top left corner, two other, or possibly even the same, large felids are shown within a poorly preserved scene of hunting and trapping. Notably, they are also ‘controlled’ by a male figure with the same featureless black head who raises a mace above his head in what will become the classic smiting pose. Mirroring this action, on the lower left, another man in the same pose subdues human captives. The message is clear, and while not new, the use of large carnivores and shackled humans to tell the tale anticipates their greater use in the succeeding Naqada III period.

Considered all together, the animals presented in the Painted Tomb can be understood within themes of great symbolic importance: power, ritual sacrifice, and control. Yet the disjunction between animals portrayed and those known from the faunal remains (e.g., oryx, ibex, lion), cautions us that these creatures may have been imbued with other meanings, above and beyond the hunt, and may reflect the spiritual or political aspirations of its owner.

While the contemporaneity of all the painted elements on the tomb wall has been questioned, we see no distinctive stylistic nor thematic differences to support the adding or updating of the image on separate occasions. Instead, having been built and decorated at a time of crucial transition in both society and the arts (in which Hierakonpolis certainly played an important role), we feel it should be viewed as a unique window onto the evolving and ever intriguing way the Hierakonpolis elite chose to express changing concepts and rituals of power in the lead up to the dawn of the dynastic age. 



Right side of the Painted Tomb main tableau.